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SERBIANS AND THEIR NATIONAL POETRY

By DR. M. R. VESNICH

Serbian Minister in Paris

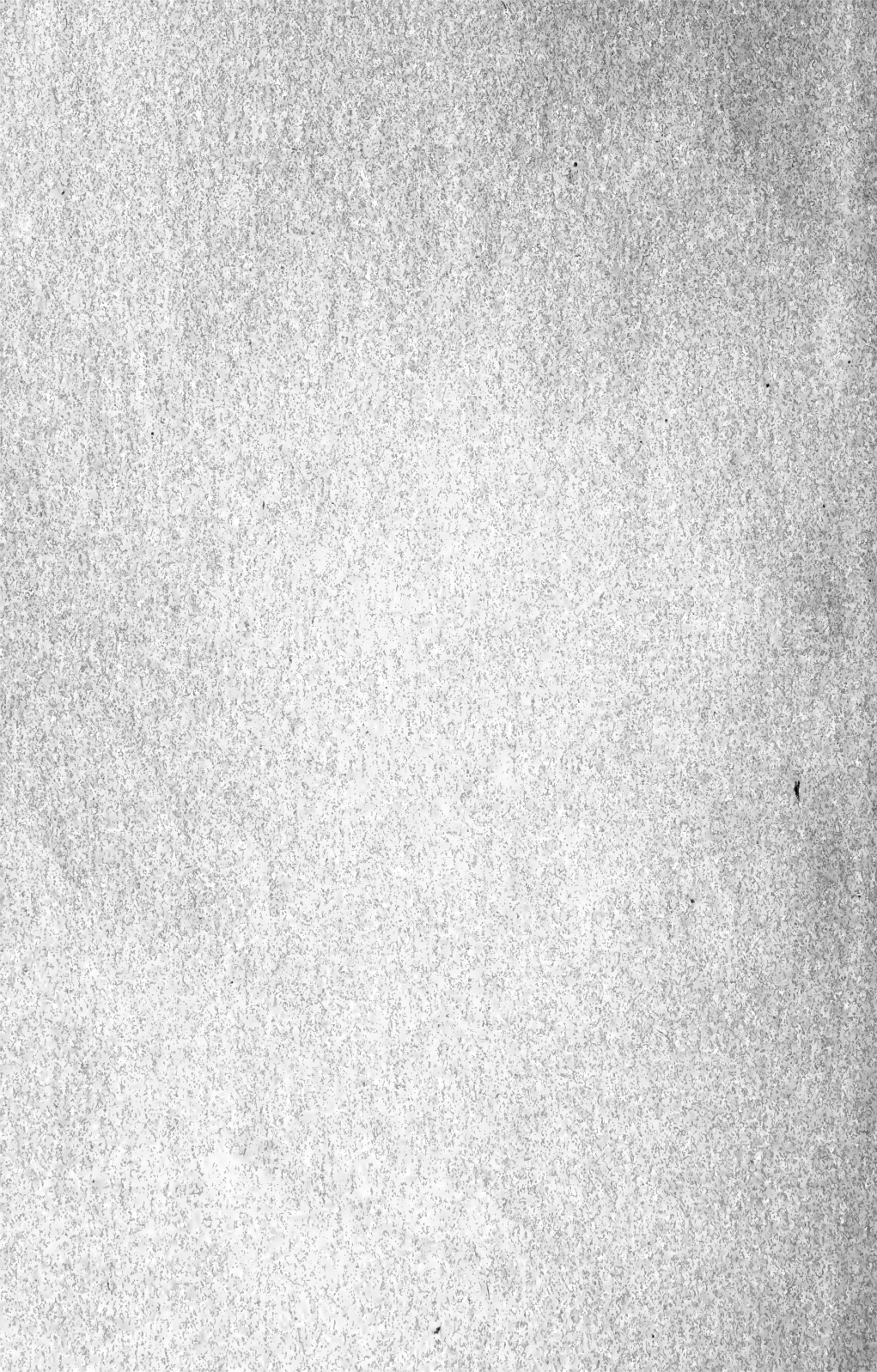
Translated by

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SERBIANS AND THEIR NATIONAL POETRY

By Dr. M. R. Vesnich, Serbian Minister in Paris

During the past three years the Serbian people have surprised their best friends by displaying qualities whose very existence was unknown. Although the best soldiers in the Balkans, the inequality under which the Serbian people labored in 1876, when war was declared on Turkey, and the unpopularity of the Serbo-Bulgarian war in 1885, disparaged this small country in the eyes of Europe. So now many ask: Whence come these military and warlike qualities of the Serbian people?

From the first days of the national resurrection, the Serbian government sent young officers to the military schools of Russia, Germany, and France, to study technical and military science. She founded like schools in Serbia also, and supplied the army with the best arms and ammunition. Furthermore, the first organizers of national defense came from France, who brought to us, not only their knowledge, but the French military spirit as well. Our men have good physical constitutions; they are sober, and very patient. Most of them are illiterate, but nevertheless their morals are excellent. In patriotism they far surpass their instruction. To what do they owe these qualities? I answer without any hesitation: To our national poetry.

When, in 1389, Serbia was defeated in a terrible battle in Polye Kosovo (The Field of Blackbirds), where two sovereigns were killed, Sultan Amurat and Tsar Lazar, the Ottoman army overran the Serbian nation with such fury that our intellectual evolution was crushed at one blow; it was, so to speak, petrified. The national spirit took refuge in itself. Subdued and oppressed for centuries, the Serbian people continued their national existence at their own hearths and in their monasteries, founded by ancient kings, and hidden away in the mountains. For five centuries no

school instruction was permitted, and ecclesiastics knew neither how to read nor write. They said mass and recited prayers by heart. All historical knowledge, philosophy of life, and moral principles, were collected and reduced to traditions, and these were transmitted from generation to generation by the elders. The more they were obliged to hide their sentiments from Turkish oppression, the stronger they became. By this instinctive preservation, our ancestors remembered their national past, as the foundation for a brighter future. And as illiterate ecclesiastics learned their prayers by heart, so one might say that the nation learned its history by heart, and that each generation embellished it by its idealism. During the long winter evenings, or on festival days, or religious holidays, Serbian youths sat around the fire for long hours, and, with bated breath, heard from the mouths of grandmothers fairy tales and charades, whenever there were not old men to recite the national rhapsodies with the *gusle*, praising righteousness, honesty, and filial devotion, to such a degree that these seemed sacred and divine. The bards who best preserved and developed national poetry—Serbian heroic ballads—were in most cases blind old men. The epic of *Kosovo* resembles very much the *Chanson de Roland* with this difference, that five centuries under a foreign yoke have made of it a kind of national history. Our ancestors seek in this source a spiritual principle of moral and civic life. In a declaration of Montenegrin chiefs in 1803, we find the following passage:

If in Montenegro there shall be found a man, a village, tribe, or county, who openly or secretly betrays the Fatherland, we shall curse him forever, as Vuk Brankovich, who, betraying the Servians at Kosovo, was cursed by all people, and was bereft of the divine mercy.

A Serbian poem preserved an appeal which Tsar Lazar had addressed to his faithful *voyvods* and *boyards* on the eve of the memorable battle, which was marked at the French Court by singing *Te Deum* in the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. Four years before this event, that is in 1385, J. Froissart, a French historian of that time,

wrote of the deposition of Leo VI, the King of Armenia. He mentioned also a preceding conflict between Serbians and Turks, and in his *Chronicle* we read as follows:

I will now tell you what Tsar Lazar did. He knew well he was defied by Amurat-Bakin, and knew well he should speedily hear other tidings of him; therefore he made provision to defend himself and wrote letters to all knights and squires, and all other men capable of bearing arms to guard the entrance and passage of Amurat through the country. . . . He ordered them strictly that after seeing these letters, or after hearing messages which he sent to them they should join him, because there was no time for delay. All such as the Tsar Lazar sent for, obeyed willingly, *and many came there who were not sent for, such as heard thereof, to aid and exalt our faith, and to destroy infidels.*

In the song "Tsar Lazar and Tsaritsa Militsa" the principal idea is similar to the above citation.¹ This is one of the most beautiful poems of the Kosova cycle. Tsaritsa Militsa, the wife of Lazar, in order to save the scion of her race, entreats her brothers, one after another, to stay from the battle, but they are all eager to go, and they go. The youngest of them, Voin Yugovich said:

Ne bih ti se junak povratio,
Ni careve jedeke pustio,
Da bih znao da bih poginuo;
Idem sejo, u Kosovo ravno,
Za krst casni krvcu proljevati,
I za vjeru s bracom umrijeti.

(Never backward goes a noble warrior,
Never leaves the coursers of his master,
Even when he knows that death awaits him;
I shall go, my sister, to Kosovo
For the Holy Cross my blood to shed,
And to die for my faith with my brothers).

When the Turkish hurricane swept away the Serbian Empire, the spirit of the people held fast to its glorious past, seeking to frame a new ideal for the future on these foundations. History was poetized. The sentiments, qualities, and defects, were, so to speak, individualized. Thus audac-

¹A free English translation of this popular song may be found in *Heroic Ballads of Servia*, by George R. Noyes and Leonard Bacon, pp. 60-67. Boston, 1913 (Sherman, French & Co.).

ity and chivalrous emprise were personified in Milosh Obilich and his two comrades Kosanchich and Toplitsa; wisdom and resignation in Tsar Lazar; heroism, justice, and protection of the feeble in Marko Kralyevich (Prince Marko); treachery and cowardice in Vuk Brankovich; tenderness in the maid of Kosovo; the magnanimity of a grand seignior in Strahinya Banovich; kind-heartedness in the mother of Marko Kralyevich; patriotic suffering in voyvoda Rayko and damsel Margita. Serbian soldiers before they become officers, even those soldiers who never can be officers, are familiar with these personifications of the national spirit. They know them sometimes better (or at least they believe they do) than their chiefs, for they have grown up with them, and all the actions of their life have been shaped according to these patterns. Their lives have been praised and lifted up to Obilich, while cowards have been cursed and debased to Brankovich. Owing to the national poetry, each Serbian, from early youth, knows the past of his country. He knows the virtues which aggrandized that State, and knows the vices which ruined it. He does not regret to die for justice and righteousness, in order to be worthy of Obilich. A French politician was right when he said some time ago of the last Serbian battle in December, 1914: "The hero of the old Serbian legend, Marko Kralyevich, has taken command of the national army."

Indeed, the Serbian epos is not yet finished. The last Turko-Balkan wars 1912-1913, were sung by simple soldiers and some of them are even now-a-days composing poems of the present European cataclysm as one of the most significant in human history.—*Translated by Milivoy S. Stanoyevich.*

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